

Eastern Partnership: Incomplete Gestalt

Dzianis Melyantsou

Summary

On March 20th the EU summit in Brussels adopted the final version of the EU's Eastern Partnership policy (EaP), which is aimed at the EU's closer integration with six post-Soviet states, including Belarus. Belarus is going to participate in the EaP as an equal partner, free from any preconditions. At the same time, Alexander Lukashenka's invitation to the EaP inaugural summit in May is still in the balance.

New Words, Old Sense

Just as BISS's earlier analyses¹ predicted, the Declaration of Eastern Partnership adopted by the European Council has been considerably amended as compared to its previous versions, published at the end of 2008.

What was changed most significantly is the motivation part of the paper. It had openly stated the EaP's geopolitical importance and a need to strengthen the EU's eastern neighbors' security following Russia's aggression in the Caucasus in August 2008. The EaP version announced in December 2008 unequivocally declared the EU's intentions to increase its political influence in the six post-Soviet states to be included in the EaP and create a buffer zone of loyal countries on the EU's eastern border.

The EaP Declaration of March 20th, instead of the emotional rhetoric of threat from Russia, states the necessity to sustain stability in the post-Soviet countries and facilitate their economic development through closer cooperation with the EU.² However, the geopolitical rhetoric may have been left out, but the project's geopolitical motivation is still there. The Eastern Partnership policy essentially aims to gradually engage the post-Soviet states in the European integration process, bringing them consequently under the EU's political influence. Thus, what Russia's Foreign Minister Lavrov said about the EU's attempts to spread its sphere of influence appears to be completely true.

In launching its new policy for the eastern neighbors, the European Union seeks to create an economic integration bloc as an alternative to the one being formed by Russia on the post-Soviet territories. The early version of the European Commission's proposal for Eastern Partnership subordinated the EU's integration with the six East European states to the EU – Russia relations, the latter being defined as strategically important. At present the EaP and the EU – Russia relations are treated as parallel projects.

¹ <http://belinstitute.eu/images/stories/documents/bb122008ru.pdf>

² PRESIDENCY CONCLUSIONS. BRUSSELS EUROPEAN COUNCIL 19/20 MARCH 2009. – http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_data/docs/pressData/en/misc/106577.pdf

Unlike the earlier EaP proposals, the Declaration of March 20th focuses on values, which should be shared by all the member states. This has a number of reasons. The first one is the necessity to counterbalance the noticeable geopolitical bias of the previous EaP proposals, which was already causing serious discontent. The second one is that the value approach gives grounds to criticize and issue additional conditions for such undemocratic countries as Belarus or Azerbaijan.

The Eastern Partnership policy itself offers equal terms to all the participants. The fact that Belarus has been invited to take part completely legitimizes the Belarusian leadership on the one hand and cancels its previous status as 'the last dictatorship in Europe', on the other. For this reason, in order to have further grounds for its attempts to democratize Belarus, the European Union has to apply its value requirements to all the EaP participants. Belarus has shown considerable understanding of these measures, the press secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointing out the EaP's non-discriminatory character.³

Conditionality Again

Participation in all the projects and activities of the Eastern Partnership is not a single event, as the progress and degree of integration will be determined by 'the member states' willingness and efforts taken in this direction. Mutual no-visa regimes, integration into the common market and association agreements for each of the six countries will depend on their adopting European legal standards and meeting economic requirements, etc.

In other words, the European Union is going to keep to its classical conditionality approach. There is, however, a difference: unlike the Central European and Baltic states, the East European six are not offered a prospect of EU membership. On the contrary, the EaP should be viewed as something given instead of EU membership, providing at the same time a profound inclusion into the European integration process.

Whereas some of the six states may consider the EaP advantages too modest, from the Belarusian perspective they are more than might have been expected. So the conditionality approach towards the official Minsk may become an efficient tool for a controlled political and economic rapprochement with the EU.

Belarus' inclusion into the EaP as an equal partner can be viewed as making overtures to the Belarusian government, as it has not taken any considerable steps to liberalize the country's political system during the six-month suspension of the visa ban. Yet, the EU should be given credit for its political foresight, as European policy-makers have chosen to apply an engagement policy to Belarus, which at present appears to be virtually the only option to democratize Belarus and bring it into the European line of development in the long run. Unlike Russia with its pushing post-Soviet countries into debt through loans, the EU stakes on 'mild' engagement of its neighbors in attractive integration processes. In any case, this imposes certain obligations on the participants, thus facilitating their gradual transformation as envisioned by the EU. So in the long run, the EU's 'mild force' will prove much more effective than Moscow's aggressive techniques.

To Recognize or Not to Recognize

The Eastern Partnership will be officially launched at its inaugural summit, which is to be held on May 7th in Prague or Brussels (there is no final decision about its venue yet). As for Belarus, whether Alexander Lukashenko is going to be invited to the summit is still in the balance. Although Belarus has already been included into the Eastern Partnership policy, the EU is persistent in making the invitation to the Belarusian President conditional on non-recognition of the Georgian dissenting territories by the official Minsk.

³ <http://mfa.gov.by/ru/press/news/dcd17feffd682cc7.html>

If Belarus recognizes Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence, firstly, it will signal that Belarus remains politically dependent on Russia and its leadership lacks motivation for further rapprochement with the EU. Secondly, it will cause an embarrassing situation, with the summit taking place in the absence of one of the leaders of the East European six, be it either Lukashenka or Saakashvili. However, both Georgia and Belarus are equally important for the Eastern Partnership, as the absence of either country renders the whole EaP policy pointless. There is also an understanding that if Belarus is not to be represented at the EaP inaugural *summit* on a *summit* level, the prospect of engaging Belarus in a full-scale co-operation within the EaP framework does not seem quite feasible, as the official Minsk demands all or nothing.

For Minsk, the leader's visit to Prague (or Brussels) is also of crucial importance, as it would symbolize the final coming to terms with 'Europe's last dictator', at the same time sending a powerful signal to Moscow, which would strengthen Lukashenka's position in his negotiations with its eastern neighbor. Besides, participation in the EaP summit would be the first official visit to the EU since the visa ban was suspended, a touchstone, which would in many aspects determine the terms and format of the Belarusian President's official visit to the EU capital and major European states.

So it can be predicted that in all likelihood, the official Minsk is not going to recognize Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's sovereignty at least until May 7th, in spite of the Kremlin's constant pressure, and the EU will invite the Belarusian President to the inaugural summit.

Even if Belarus recognizes Georgia's dissenting regions, which is exactly what the Kremlin is coercing it into, and Lukashenka misses the EaP inaugural summit, it will not be a fatal blow to the EU–Belarus dialog or the country's participation in the EaP in general. Belarus may refuse to attend the EaP's political forums to be held regularly on the level of heads of governments and ministries, but it has a profound interest in a number of projects and co-operation spheres, for example, access to the EU market, so it may participate on a technical level. Such a scenario would still leave room for conditionality and facilitate Belarus' engagement into European cooperation. Although it would limit Belarus' opportunities for multilateral cooperation within the EaP framework due to its stance on Georgia, the bilateral EU–Belarus mechanism would still be working.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Firstly, the EU has included Belarus unconditionally into its regional integration project, which should offer an alternative to the CIS and the Common Economic Space project. This is a powerful claim to reshape spheres of influence in Eastern Europe to the advantage of the growing EU, which cannot but provoke a negative reaction from the Kremlin. For the official Minsk, this means a multiple expansion of its room for maneuver and increasing its geopolitical weight.

Secondly, the EU has included values and conditionality into the EaP project, which strengthens its leverage on the East European six and political transformations in the post-Soviet countries, allowing the EU to control dialog with such partners as Belarus.

Thirdly, the degree of Belarus' involvement in the EaP is still undecided, as there is still no decision on whether to invite President Lukashenka to the EaP inaugural summit. The issue of non-recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia is viewed as a litmus test of the Belarusian government's pro-European intentions and its dependence on the Kremlin.

Fourthly, irrespective of the Belarusian President's participation in the EaP summit, Belarus has already become engaged in integration processes that will have a long-term influence on Minsk's domestic and foreign politics. Political dialog with the EU will be continued in any

case. The EU faces the task of maintaining the dialog and persistently engaging Belarus in the process of European integration.